



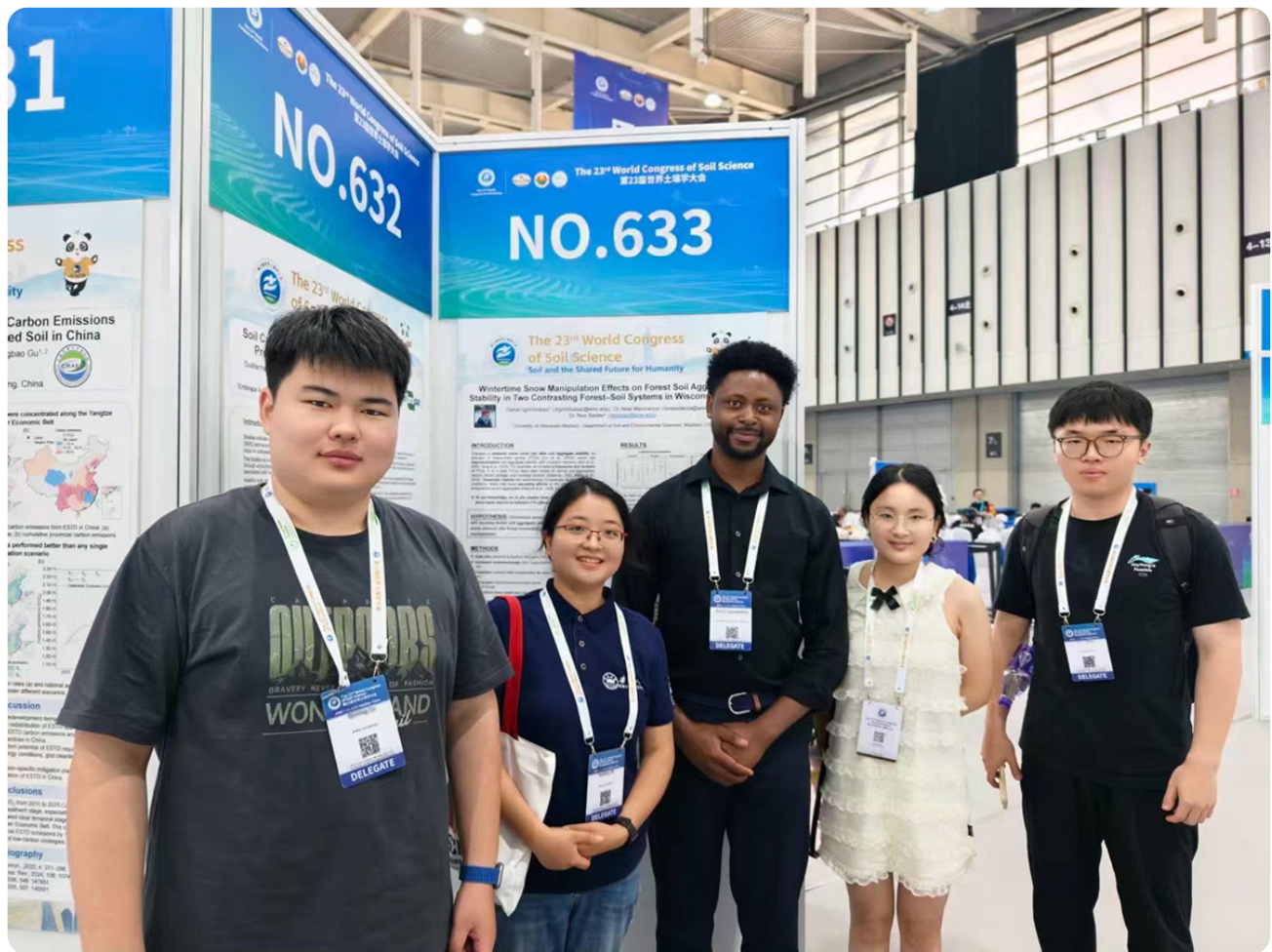
**Science
Societies**

Big journeys, big ideas

10 young soil scientists traveled to a global conference, returning with new collaborators and a broader vision of their science

By Dan Linehan

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University of Wisconsin-Madison doctoral student Daniel Igirimbabazi, center, stands with international researchers in front of his research poster. Igirimbabazi shared his first season of research regarding how freeze-thaw cycles affect forest soil aggregate stability during a poster session at the conference in Nanjing, China.

Jacob Clements was shaking off some pre-presentation jitters. He had never presented this research before, and now he was about to take the stage at the World Congress of Soil Science in Nanjing, China.

Moments before he began, Clements looked up to see about 30 scientists streaming into the room. This became one of the defining moments of his trip.

“And I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh,’” he said later. “I don’t want to sound egotistical, but people are actually interested in what I’m doing.” The presentation was only the beginning. Afterwards, several attendees invited Clements to dinner to continue discussing his research.

“Now, I’m about to write a paper with a couple of the professors who came up and spoke with me,” said Clements, who studies how biodegradable plastic mulches affect soil carbon.



University of Tennessee doctoral student Jacob Clements addresses attendees during his oral presentation on biodegradable plastics and soil health. Clements spoke to a crowded room of international scientists at the 23rd World Congress of Soil Science in Nanjing, China.

Clements was one of 10 SSSA members who received a World Congress of Soil Science Fellowship to travel to and present at the international conference, held June 7–12. The

grant put Clements in the room he needed to be in.

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“Without that fellowship, I wouldn’t have been able to present my research, get feedback, or meet any of the people I met,” he said.

Jacob’s experience making connections was far from unique. Daniel Igirimbabazi, a Ph.D. student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison studying freeze–thaw dynamics in forest soils, attended a presentation by a leader in his field. He stayed afterward to ask questions, and she would later visit him at his poster.

“That was touching because I was not expecting someone who is highly regarded in my field to be interested enough to check out my work,” he said.

Xueyu Zhou, a graduate student studying micro- and nano-plastics at Washington State University, said her area of research—the degradation of biodegradable plastic mulch—is a hot topic in China. As a student expecting to graduate next year, exploring post-doc opportunities was perhaps her biggest goal.

"Several people asked me what I was planning to do after graduation, and I appreciated that so much," she said.

Duplicate Sambani, a Ph.D. student at the University of Florida studying soil health in citrus systems, recalls a shy young woman who hovered nearby after the end of her presentation and apologized for her poor English.

"My Chinese is worse than your English," Sambani told her. The young woman had a video blog and a few questions, such as the connection between soil health, plant health, and human health.

"I always say we feed the soil, and the soil feeds the plant, and the plant feeds the human," Sambani said. She would go on to connect with a Japanese scientist also studying citrus, potentially opening up a post-doc opportunity.

Clements met with several journal editors he's considering submitting to.

"Just getting face time with them was so huge," he said.



University of Florida doctoral student Duplicate Sambani presents her research on soil health in citrus systems during the 23rd World Congress of Soil Science in Nanjing, China. Sambani was one of 10 Soil Science Society of America members who received a fellowship to attend the international conference held June 7-12, 2026.

Beyond the presentation

Learning wasn't limited to conference sessions. On the bullet train from Shanghai to Nanjing, Vaibhav Shelar watched out the window and was reminded of his native India, as farmers in both countries managed challenging soils as best they could.

The potential of agrivoltaics in particular—the combination of solar panels with high-value crops—was noticeable. He also saw how greenhouses can reduce damage from pests, disease, and weather variance. And he noticed the use of biofertilizers to replenish soil health. He now hopes to test cover crops between fruit rows back home.

William Hernández, who recently earned his master's in pedology at Virginia Tech, said funding in-person scientific collaboration offers critical advantages over virtual conferences.

In virtual events, "you don't have breaks between sessions with time to follow up with a panelist."

Mahmoud Rady, a Ph.D. candidate studying regenerative agriculture at Clemson University, also took home some insights from the work culture of the host country. He was struck by the efficiency he saw both inside and outside the conference halls. "On the road, people don't walk, they run," he said.

The experience reinforced the importance of using time wisely and staying responsive in a competitive research environment while producing careful science.

The cohort learned from and leaned on each other, as well. Sambani and Igirimbabazi both study microbial changes in soil, and Igirimbabazi uses equipment to measure soil respiration that Sambani hopes to incorporate into her own research.

"The fellowship offered extensive support before, during, and after the trip, including workshops with travel tips, a group breakfast, and a closing dinner."

"As soon as I get back to Florida, I'm reaching out to Daniel," she said.



Clemson University doctoral candidate Mahmoud Rady, left, poses with a fellow attendee in front of the welcome banner at the 23rd World Congress of Soil Science in Nanjing, China. Rady was part of a cohort of young soil scientists who traveled to the international conference to present their work and build global networks.

The fellowship itself was more than a scholarship. It offered extensive support before, during, and after the trip, including workshops with travel tips, a group breakfast, and a closing dinner.

"It's not just like other scholarships that you have some money but they supported us from the beginning to the end," Rady said.

Thinking globally

For many of the cohort, the experience offered an initial foray into science as a truly global endeavor. They arrived thinking about their own labs, methods, and priorities. They left with broader horizons and emboldened by the idea that a global community tackles many of the same questions they do.



University of Nebraska–Lincoln graduate research assistant Liz Eroshenko, left, holds a large soil sample alongside William Hernández, who recently earned a master's in pedology at Virginia Tech. They traveled to China to participate in an international soil judging contest organized alongside

the World Congress of Soil Science events.

Igirimbabazi, the Wisconsin student studying freeze–thaw cycles, met researchers from China, Finland, Russia, Japan, and Korea who examine similar processes in their climates.

"Sometimes one may be taken away by their research in a local area or state or country and they don't consider what scientists in other parts of the world are working on," he said.

For example, a Russian researcher is looking closer into soil porosity, though Igirimbabazi has paid closer attention to aggregates.

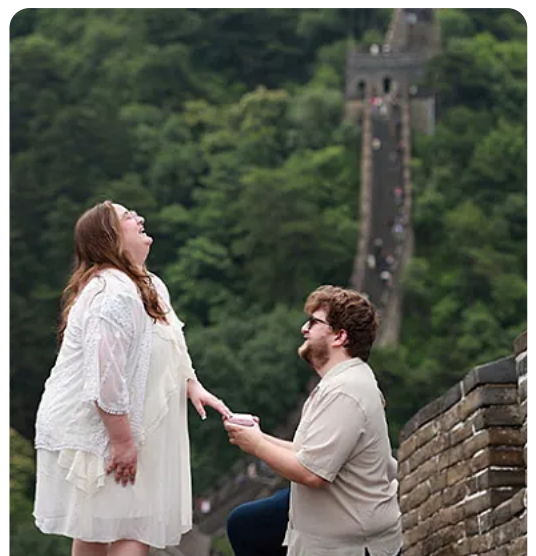
"I want to dive into that side deeper," he said. Soil with more pore space could contain more water before freezing, which could influence its stability.

Often, language was a barrier. Translation apps helped make communication possible while imposing limitations of their own. For example, when Igirimbabazi described the buffering capacity of forests, the app might define "buffer" as "limit response" or even "no response."

Still, some conversation was universal. When Igirimbabazi entered the bus from the airport to the convention center, he felt a palpable sense of belonging.

"We were having trouble communicating, but you could tell they were excited to see me as a foreigner coming into their country," he said.

Dentistry, tea, and a proposal



The cohort also took advantage of the opportunity to experience local culture.

Hernández, the pedology master's student, attended a tea ceremony in a small village near the lake. He later joined fellow attendee Liz Eroshenko and a friend for an impromptu

pedal golf cart ride down a tributary of the Yangtze River. They attracted plenty of attention, including from a pair of men who recorded a video of them saying "happy summer."

Perhaps the most memorable experience goes to Clements, who proposed to his girlfriend atop the Great Wall of China near Beijing.

"I had just passed the preliminary exams for my Ph.D.," he said. "I thought, 'If I'm going overseas, why not pay for her to go and make it a vacation afterwards?'"

It may not have been an official outcome of the fellowship, but it did produce at least one pair of future "soilmates."

Doctoral student Jacob Clements kneels to propose to his girlfriend on the Great Wall of China. Clements planned the vacation and proposal to take place immediately after presenting his soil geochemistry research at the conference.

The Sarah Lingle Priority Fund

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